
Day 245 - September 2

The Exiled Nation (585-535 BCE)

Ezekiel's Restoration Prophecies

Readings: *Ezekiel 37:1-28; 38:1-23; 39:1-29*

Reflections:

- Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones is one of the key Old Testament passages regarding the hope of the resurrection. For most of the history of Israel, the afterlife was basically a mystery. They had the concept of Sheol, a dark place of the dead but even that was poorly understood. Also, the role of God's Spirit was relatively limited compared to the time of Christ and following. Yet in this passage, the role of the Spirit in guiding Ezekiel through the revelation is central.
- The vision of a valley of skeletons coming alive to become a vast army would have deeply encouraged the Israelites in captivity. No doubt, they felt dead and weak and powerless.
- The vision unfolds in two very distinct stages. First, the bones are reassembled and covered with flesh and yet they are still dead. Second, the restored bodies are then filled with the Spirit and come alive to become a vast army. It is this vast army that will again take the land so that the people can live securely.
- With the coming of Jesus, it is easy to see how this was a foreshadowing of the Spirit transforming the first Christ-followers into an unstoppable army that swept across the Roman Empire. The challenge again is that this passage has a very clear focus on the Israelites being restored to their land. Yet, in the apparent fulfillment, all of this is completely symbolic as all nations are welcomed into the kingdom.
- Also, this passage was a key passage for the Pharisees belief in the resurrection of the dead and yet it obviously is a symbolic, prophetic passage. Even the ultimate resurrection of the dead as we would understand it through the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament writers, would have no connection to advancing the kingdom of God or taking the land.
- The most encouraging aspect of this passage is the vision of God taking our complete deadness, brokenness and weakness and transforming us – first healing and restoring us, than empowering us to advance his kingdom.
- The following vision is of two sticks, Judah and Israel, being reunited into one nation again. With this reunification is the hope of being cleansed from their perpetual sin and idolatry, the promise of a new king like David, and the restoration of God's sanctuary within the land.

Again for a people in captivity, these are incredible words of hope. In hindsight, it would seem that Jesus powerfully fulfills this prophecy but does so by completely redefining all the terms. People are reunited but it is not Israel but all nations. A new king comes in the line of David but he is not the political king of Israel but the king of a new spiritual kingdom. The sanctuary is restored but it is not a building but a community of people who in their committed relationships become a spiritual temple for God's Spirit.

- The next vision is extensive as it reveals a great apocalyptic battle where great evil forces attack Israel and are miraculously defeated and buried in a valley. The names of Gog and Magog are apparently symbolic for great forces of evil. In light of Israel's past of being dominated by powerful nations, it makes sense that the names are generic.
- The vision represents a powerful contrast to the vision of the valley of dry bones. Just as the people of God are resurrected out of complete weakness to become a powerful army, so the vast army of evil is decimated and ultimately buried in the valley, with their flesh becoming food for the birds.
- The nature of this battle is to be understood as an epic battle for all times. In fact, these same symbolic names reappear in Revelations 20 as the writer of Revelations returns to this same epic battle in his vision. This should underscore for us that this vision is ultimately about the spiritual battle, rather than a physical battle (See Ephesians 6:12-20).
- We should also note in this battle that creation is often referenced and as we witness in Paul's writing in Romans 8:20-22, the spiritual realities of this life have an impact on the created order.
- The concluding encouragement reminds Israel again that God will bring them back to their land. In fact, this does happen but it is nowhere to the degree or proportion that they expected. Again we are left to wrestle with the fact that many of these prophecies were fulfilled in a way that would have been very difficult for the people of Jesus' day to imagine. This reminds us to always look at the essence of what God is saying and not try to nail down with complete certainty the form with which he will fulfill his word. God's ways are not our ways. Yet with this said, God will fulfill his word. What he declares, he will do!